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7 April 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Meeting With Secretary Laird

TIME AND PLACE: Secretary Laird's Office, Tuesday, 7 April  
1445-1530

PERSONS PRESENT: Secretary Laird, General Pursley, Mr. Carver

1. South Vietnam. I opened by commenting on the current flurry of Communist military activity in South Vietnam initiated on the night of 31 March. This flurry was still going on and there was some evidence that the Communists planned to re-cycle with additional attacks on or about 7 April. The magnitude of the current rise depended on the time period one used for the purposes of comparison. The present level of Communist activity was considerably higher than anything yet seen in 1970, but still did not exceed the level of various high points launched by Communist forces during 1969.

2. Communist objectives were somewhat obscure, particularly since the current activity cycle appeared to have been initially planned for February. The launch date seems to have been slipped for various reasons, almost certainly including the effectiveness of pre-emptive allied spoiling operations. Among other things, Hanoi was clearly trying to remind the South Vietnamese, and the world, that Communist military forces were still very much present in South Vietnam and still had considerable capabilities. Thus at least part of the current activity round's objectives lay in the psychological and propaganda field. Hanoi also probably wanted to get US casualties back up into three digits for at least a couple of weeks and to probe for possible ARVN weaknesses, questing for a tactical success with political overtones. Furthermore, Hanoi almost certainly wanted to keep the ARVN, and the US, fairly busy in South Vietnam in order to dampen enthusiasm for incursions into Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.

3. The current round of activity was probably not stage-setting for moves in the political or diplomatic field. If the noise level remained

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high for more than another week or so, however, this judgment would have to be reviewed.

4. On the domestic front, there is a considerable amount of stirring in the South Vietnamese political pot. We briefly discussed the lingering echoes of the Chau case in Saigon, the GVN's problems with the students, and the current demonstrations of the disabled veterans who are seeking greater financial benefits from the government. I made the point that although Thieu does not at the moment have a political crisis on his hands, he will have to play his cards with somewhat greater finesse than he has shown in the past week if he is to avoid generating some rather sharp outcries and considerable static from both the Saigon politicians and the international, particularly American, press.

5. Laos. We discussed the current pattern of enemy activity in northern Laos, particularly in the area around Sam Thong and Long Tieng and the Plaine des Jarres. I noted that the North Vietnamese juggernaut which had rolled across the Plaine in late February and early March seemed to be stalled, at least momentarily. The evidence available strongly suggested that Hanoi's forces had outrun their supplies and, hence, had been compelled to pause and regroup. Because of the Meo forces capture of enemy caches last summer and fall, in this spring's campaign the North Vietnamese Army was unable to move into pre-positioned stockpiles and, hence, was compelled to live off its own logistic tail. This made it much more vulnerable to being stalled or inhibited by aerial interdiction.

6. The brief breathing space of the past few weeks had been put to good use by Vang Pao's MR II forces to reinforce Long Tieng, retake Sam Thong, and generally improve their defensive positions and prospects. Thus things have been looking up slightly over the last week or two. Nonetheless, we could not guarantee that the picture would remain bright when the North Vietnamese troops once again started to move, particularly when or if they committed the 312th Division.

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7. I made the general point that while we could not guarantee that Long Tieng would be held, the longer we were able to delay the North Vietnamese advance and keep Communist forces working in the general vicinity of MR II Headquarters, the better chance we stood of

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stalling Hanoi's offensive at least through this year's campaign season. Thus every day, and particularly every week, gained was a net political plus. Laird noted that the Air Force was also contributing to this stalling operation.

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9. Cambodia. I explained the current situation in Cambodia and also tried to explain why post-18 March events there constituted a potential change in the total Indochina situation of very great magnitude. Hanoi's whole style of fighting the war depended heavily on the relatively undisturbed use of Cambodian sanctuaries. The loss of these sanctuaries could affect North Vietnam's campaign as adversely as the Greek Communist insurgency immediately following World War II was affected by the closing of the Albanian and Yugoslav frontiers.

10. I also pointed out that the Cambodian situation could not remain static and that Hanoi was already moving briskly in a very hard-nosed fashion to coerce the Lon Nol government into resuming a pre-18 March posture or, failing that, to unseat it. Meanwhile, the US still seemed unable to make up its mind what it wanted to do. This was very much a situation in which inaction was clearly a course of action with its own attendant risks. If the President, after review of all available information and a careful weighing of pro's and con's, should opt to do nothing, that was clearly his constitutional prerogative. I hoped, however, that if the US Government did not respond to the situation, its non-response was the result of a deliberate Presidential decision and not simple bureaucratic inertia or inadvertence.

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11. I also explained to Secretary Laird that this was a situation in which President Thieu would be certain to follow his concept of South Vietnam's national interests regardless of what the US decided to do. Thieu had long been concerned that even under the most optimum internal circumstances, Vietnamization would never succeed so long as North Vietnamese forces enjoyed sanctuary in Cambodia from which they could sally forth whenever they wished to. Thieu had expressed these views very bluntly to a number of people and, for that matter, had spelled them out in considerable detail to me last November. Thus Thieu was bound to see the current situation in Cambodia as a windfall he could not ignore. I was certain that regardless of what Thieu might or might not say to Ambassador Bunker, ARVN forces would respond to Cambodian requests for assistance and would probably mount operations against Communist sanctuaries whenever an opportunity afforded itself. Laird agreed with my assessment of Thieu's views and

12. Laird asked what we should do to assist Lon Nol. I replied that we did not need to do very much at this stage. We did need to convey quietly and privately to him the fact that the US Government strongly supported genuine Cambodian neutrality, did not want to complicate his position, but was prepared to provide some discreet assistance if he needed it and if the provision of it was not politically counter-productive. I also pointed out that we needed to be able to talk with Lon Nol and his colleagues and perhaps give them some discreet advice. For example, the Cambodian Government was now making public noises about eliminating the institution of monarchy and setting up a republic. In my view, this would be a tactical blunder of the first order. The Cambodian peasantry had an almost mystical reverence for the throne as an institution and an attack on this institution would give Sihanouk and his Communist supporters a great deal of political leverage. On the other hand, properly played, the monarchy issue could be turned against Sihanouk, probably with considerable effect. Sihanouk, strictly speaking, was not the legitimate heir to the throne -- a fact of which he is well aware and about which he has always been sensitive. When King Monivong died in 1941, Admiral Decoux (then French Governor General) arranged for Prince Monireth, the King's eldest son, to be passed over and for the throne to be given to his nephew, Norodom Sihanouk, then a student in a French lycee in Saigon. In lieu of establishing a republic, the Lon Nol government would do well to consider putting Monireth on the throne

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and taking the tack that after a 30-year period of usurpation by Sihanouk, it was restoring rightful legitimacy.

13. In any event, it seemed to me that this was the sort of thing the US Government should be thinking about

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14. With a rather owlsh smile, Laird said he agreed with my views on Cambodia and had in fact been urging substantially the same general line on Kissinger that morning (though he had not taken up the monarchy issue, not having known the details involved). He said he was also prepared to raise this again with the President and hoped there would be some further action in this area in the very near future. On that note our meeting ended.

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